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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000416

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MINISTER OF INTERIOR DISCUSSES CONCERNS ABOUT SHIA
ACTIVISM IN BAHRAIN

REF: MANAMA 347

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (B)(D)

1. (C) Summary. Interior Minister Shaikh Rashid described for the Ambassador the government's concern that the Sunni-Shia split would grow in Bahrain if decisive action were not taken against Shia political activism during recent Ashura celebrations. Shaikh Rashid personally met with leading Shia cleric Al-Ghuraifi, trying to gain his support. Al-Ghuraifi, for his part, asked the Minister to control anti-Shia articles/editorials in the press. Shaikh Rashid also met with Sunnis, who he said were concerned that black flags (representing Shia mourning during Ashura) had suddenly popped up everywhere. The Minister, who expressed confidence that the problem was manageable, said that his Ministry was making an effort to bring more Shia into the police force. End summary.

2. (C) Minister of Interior Shaikh Rashid Al-Khalifa, during a March 16 meeting with the Ambassador, discussed the government's concerns about activities of certain Shia during recent Ashura celebrations as well as his personal efforts to control Shia extremism in Bahrain. Showing photographs taken during Ashura of Hizballah flags, Khomeini and Khamenei posters, and a group of Bahrainis stomping on an American flag, Shaikh Rashid said that there was definitely a greater political edge to this year's Ashura activities (although only a minority of Shia were involved in activities of concern). For Sunnis, who suddenly saw black flags popping up everywhere, it appeared that some Shia were using Ashura as a political opportunity. He said the Ministry received numerous calls, including from some Shia, asking what the government was going to do in response. The Sunnis expected the government to take some action, or they would act themselves.

3. (C) Shaikh Rashid said the government was afraid that if it did not act promptly, the split between the two religious communities would grow. He said Bahrain did not want to follow the example of Saudi Arabia, which waited too long before acting decisively against extremism (Sunnis). And if the government waited too long, there would be a Sunni reaction against the Shia. The best strategy, he said, was for the Shia leadership to take care of the problem themselves.

4. (C) Shaikh Rashid has played a prominent public role in his government's effort to deal with the issue, meeting with members of the two houses of the Parliament (Shura Council and Council of Representatives -- reftel), conferring with leaders of Shia "matams" (assembly halls), and calling on Shia cleric Shaikh Abdulla Al-Ghuraifi. He described Shaikh Al-Ghuraifi as positive and understanding of what the government was trying to do. "He appreciated my visit. He is proud to be a Bahraini, and believes that unity is important." But Shaikh Al-Ghuraifi also expressed concern to the Minister that the government was letting the story get too big in the newspapers. He asked Shaikh Rashid to control press articles/editorials critical of the Shia. Shaikh Rashid said he could not control the press but, playing on the similarity of the Arabic words for flag (alam) and pen (qalam), told Al-Ghuraifi that it is a question of flag and pen. "If you raise Hizbollah flags, pens will rise. If you want the pens to stop, bring down the flags."

5. (U) In his Thursday night (March 18) prayer sermon at Imam Sadiq Mosque, Shaikh Al-Ghuraifi, according to press reports, stated that unity, security, and stability are red lines that cannot be crossed, and he rejected any behavior that harmed those concepts. He then warned against "pens" of "incitement and treason" that take advantage of events to cause enmity between people, and incite the regime against a major and loyal sect in society. He called on the government to stop these "pens," warning of a disaster if they continued to write. He said the Minister of Interior had invited him to the Ministry, and his acceptance would depend on "how much change we see on the ground."

6. (C) Shaikh Rashid said that, in addition to his approach to a leading Shia cleric, he is also undertaking outreach to the Sunni community. He said that he had spent the previous evening visiting Sunni majlis in the Al-Hidd area, trying to calm emotions and make sure they did not take any actions against Shia. Overall, he thought the problem was

manageable. There are extremists on both sides, he said, and they need to be controlled on both sides.

17. (C) The Ambassador asked about hiring practices in the Ministry of Interior, noting that he had heard complaints of underrepresentation of Shia. Shaikh Rashid said that the police force is now trying to set an example in recruiting from both sides. In an incoming class of police officers last month, he stated, 39 out of 40 were Shia. Another time, he said, Bahrain's municipalities put out an announcement to hire community service police. Large numbers of Shia showed up, expecting not to be hired but to embarrass the government by making a point about unemployment. When several were in fact hired, they went back to their villages complaining that they were "stuck" because they now had jobs they didn't want with the community police.

MONROE